

SPACE AND HERITAGE: ON THE GENERATIVITY OF ENVIRONING WORLDS
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Kolkata's Durgapuja and Thinking Through UNESCO's 'Intangible Heritage'

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In December 2021, UNESCO inscribed the annual Hindu festival Durgapuja of Kolkata (Calcutta), eastern India, in its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a category instituted through UNESCO's 2003 Convention.

I have been part of a collaborative project with Swati Chattopadhyay of University of California Santa Barbara (Lead-investigator) and Arijit Sen of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, entitled 'Mapping Ephemerality', looking at how this festival, its transient material processes and manifestations, as well as its emotive and performative dimensions interact with the Kolkata's more perennial urban fabric and life, producing an intense sense of locality, community and city. UNESCO's Durgapuja inscription prompted, for me, reflections on certain institutionalised taxonomies and epistemologies related to heritage.

Kolkata's Durgapuja is a 10-day festival (with 5 core days of celebration) to mark the worship of Durga - the main female goddess for Bengalis - who vanquishes Mahishasur (an evil demon) to save humanity. The story and iconography consists of Durga, her four children (Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Ganesh), Mahishasur the demon, and all their (bird/ animal) vehicles or consorts. The idols are made over months by often hereditary clay-idol makers based in Kolkata's Kumartuli area. More than 3000 temporary pavilions – called 'pandals', and made of bamboo or steel frames, fabric, straw, paper, plastic, metal sheeting and various waste-material– are erected throughout the city to house the idol, enable rituals, absorb millions of visitors and collectively present an urban spectacle, comprising the diminutive to the grand. The entire process is mobilised bottom-up by *para*(neighbourhood)-based communities through local youth clubs and formal or informal resident groups. People dress up in festive clothing and visit other pandals in the city with friends and relatives ('pandal-hopping'), often taking all-night-tours – mobilising crowds, accumulation of bodies, and collective claim on city. Decorative lighting and stalls selling snacks, handicrafts and everyday/ consumer items line up streets and fairgrounds. The whole city is re-worked as a gigantic new material, spatial, experiential and performative assemblage. Durgapuja also involves multiple forms of labour – idol makers, pandal makers, decorative lighting providers, *dhakis* (traditional drummers), priests, hawkers, cooks (for communal) – many of them coming temporarily from provincial areas. Funded originally by residents, Durgapuja also increasingly absorbs corporate and global capital, sponsors, advertisements and imagery. Highly agile and adaptive, there is equally continuous discourse on loss of vital traditions or physical elements, new aesthetic themes of pandals or commercialisation, and increasingly, engagement with environmental concerns and initiatives. The clay idols are immersed in the river Ganges on the tenth day (*bisharjan*); the festival and immersion of thousands of idols are also major urban governance exercises; the pandals are dismantled, materials often kept for annual re-use, and already, anticipation begins for the next year. Material traces of Durgapuja remain within the city's fabric after the festival ends; fragments re-appear and people galvanise back into action as the episode is re-performed the year after.



Pandal, residential street and crowd, Mudiali Puja (2022).
Photo: Subhrojyoti Mukherjee. Copyright: Swati Chattopadhyay

The curious aspect of the UNESCO inscription is that Durgapuja as a phenomenon embodies an intense level of urban spatial, physical (re)making, and materiality and tangibility. It is in fact a highly complex material and spatial production and performance. This involves deeply interrelated socio-cultural, economic and material relations and political dynamics: from fundraising, political and other patronage, ‘para’-politics and social relations; and civic governance and policing.

Hence, Durgapuja’s slotting into the category of the ‘Intangible’ seems somewhat perplexing. Being anything that’s not tangible, the ‘intangible’ seemingly bears infinite possibilities, yet it is circumscribed by what it is not – the tangible. How, then, does one account for the deep entanglements of Durgapuja’s intense, tangible materiality with its associated practices, and the social, experiential, imaginative and affective worlds that are produced by, but also produce, its material-spatial, corporeal formations? Must we necessarily inscribe heritage through mutually exclusive taxonomies? If the inherent referent of the ‘intangible’ - the world of the tangible, can be touched, felt or seen, Durgapuja certainly would lay a strong claim to that world as well. Conversely, is the material heritage of monuments, buildings or natural/ cultural sites free of embodied, imaginative, affective, storied, narrative dimensions?



Mudiali pandal facade being constructed and the labors involved (2022). Note also the cart and cart-pullers in the foreground, delivering mustard oil, used for both cooking and ritual purposes.
Photo: Subhrojyoti Mukherjee. Copyright: Swati Chattopadhyay

The notion of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) arose, as Amanda Kearney reminds us, out of a concern with the preoccupation of the West and UNESCO World Heritage listings (which originated in the WH Convention 1972) with monuments, buildings and physical (natural and cultural) sites, where numerous cultural practices did not find a place (Kearney, 2008). This would have understandably been welcome for cultures and geographies marginalised through colonial hegemony and post-war/ post-colonial international geopolitical and cultural regimes institutionalised, for example, by the United Nations or UNESCO.

However, I think there is something deeper at stake here: the marking of ICH is arguably also a way of accounting for and delimiting the 'other' within a distinctly 'othered' space – rooted in and in continuation of, a colonial and white Western epistemology premised on a cartesian divide between the material and immaterial, materiality and practice, matter and mind, environments and experience, stable temporality and ephemerality, self and other - formalised and consolidated through a post-war capitalist geo-political and thereafter, neoliberal, order. Perhaps ICH delineates a space for the 'other' that will not erode or threaten in any fundamental way the marking of stable, tangible -mostly white western - heritage. On looking at a sample of ICH inscriptions, we find that about 80-85% of the nearly 500 items inscribed since 2003 belong to non-western - often ex-colonial - geographies and contexts, culturally 'exotic' to the western gaze. A small bunch maps roughly onto the ex-Soviet or Central/ Eastern European nations and cultures, and only a tiny proportion falls within Western Europe and North America – e.g. French Pyrenean bear festivities (2022), Hungarian string dance (2022), Danish Inuit singing-dancing (2021), Slovakian and Czechian puppetry (2016) or Belgian shrimp fishing on horseback (2013). The latter ones often relate to cultural practices or traditions that are nominally peripheral to the mainstay of Western European or North American life - the West's internal 'other'. The list of (tangible) World Heritage sites is on the other hand still disproportionately populated by European and North American examples (in August 2022, there were 58 sites in Italy and only 98 in all of the African continent; 498 in Europe and North America, 195 in Asia + the Pacific). Juxtaposed this way, the ICH list also emerges as a catalogue of seemingly exotic practices and worlds, not unlike the late-19th or early-20th century anthropological, collection and museum practices that gathered, exoticised and othered diverse worlds in relation to the West.



Workers rolling leaves of the betelnut tree to create panel, Bakulbagan Puja (2018). Photo and copyright: Swati Chattopadhyay.

Alongside its complex materiality, Durgapuja has particular cyclical and durational temporalities – it is ephemeral, evoking Edmund Husserl's conceptualisation of embodied heritage as thickened temporal experience and their reiterations. Is it its elusive temporality – also a characteristic of many of the other ICH inscriptions - that fuels its, or their, conflation with the 'intangible'? This brings into question heritage designations' competence in handling the nuances of temporality. Chiara Bortolotto (2007) notes that the main innovation of ICH was not really about its intangibility – it clearly wasn't - but in fact about understanding these in terms of time, 'as evolving processes'. ICH is also equated with 'living heritage' in its own representations (UNESCO ICH website, 2022). But it also equates fluid temporalities and 'living practices' with exotic and othered cultures, not letting these permeate or mess with the 'stable' sites-and-monuments based World Heritage categories.



Female sanitation workers cleaning up, Mudiali Puja (2022). Photo and copyright: Swati Chattopadhyay.

Crucially, I want to note here that the myriad cultural practices across the world that do sit under UNESCO's ICH category (and many others which don't make it to the list), in fact, mostly straddle and contest the type of binary life-worlds and taxonomies foundational to international heritage

frameworks. But it is the fundamental epistemological frame through which these are seen and inscribed as an exotic, other-wordly 'other', and which then pre-figure our directions of knowing, that is problematic. It is telling that UNESCO uses the word 'inscription' – suggestive of the power and instrumental role of such engravings - writing over, writing into. The process of inscription is arduous, hard earned, but also deeply etched and projects conceptually divided worlds.

Anyone interested in a project of equity for marginalised cultures, practices and knowledges also need to be vigilant of the type of othering and continuations of colonial frames that UNESCO inscriptions and modern heritage management re-affirm and inscribe in newer ways. It would instead be liberating to imagine heritage through more agile formations, where tangible and intangible; materiality and practice, experience, imagination, affect; the materially stable and the ephemeral, are not incommensurable or even 'complementary' conceptual domains, but rather, part of the same wider and fluid formations.